JEJURI: A PILGRIMAGE INTO THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

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Abstract

Arun Kolhatkar's Jejuri is probably the only book of Indian poetry in English in recent times that has some claims of be considered as a possible commonwealth classic. Though it was first published in 1954 in the Opinion Literary Quarterly, it caught the attention of the critical world only it was awarded the Commonwealth Literary Prize of 1977.It has been hailed since then as the most extraordinary book of poems. It gives us a symbolic picture of modern predicament. The subject of Kolatkar's sequence of poems is religion, and the relation between religion and culture. Kolatkar's attitude is very different from treatments of the same them in modern Europe and America. The difference is not ideological; it arises out of an entirely distinct climate of sensibility. Kolatkar's poetic mind, enlivened though it may be by irony and irreverence, remains paradoxically a combination of the negatively dark and even the joyous. It represents in the final analysis a modern adjustment (present) to an accepted tradition (past). Unlike some Western work, it is not nor an attempt to construct something in a godless universe.

Keywords: Religion & Culture, Sensibility, Modern adjustment (present), Accepted tradition (past).

Introduction

The poems describe a visit to a traditional place of pilgrimage. The poet joins the pilgrimage, but it is different from the other pilgrims in that he does not share the same religious attitude. His approach may be better described as a search whereby he comes to terms with the place and with himself. He is ironic about the place of pilgrimage as well as the religious experience itself. But it would be erroneous to assume that his attitude is altogether dismissive of religious realities.

The first poem, "The Bus", sets the ball rolling. The poet, along with the other pilgrims, boards the bus. So far, Jejuri is merely a destination. The imagery has a surreal quality. The reader is involved in the journey by use of the word "you". The bus journey is

like the journey of convicts in a police – van. The only light comes through an eyelet in the tarpaulin, shooting only at the glasses of the old man sitting opposite who is also a passenger/pilgrim. When the poet gets off the bus, he retains his individuality and has not been swallowed up within the world of the bus, symbolized by the old man's head:

Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
On an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see……

At the end of the bumpy ride
with your own face on either side
when you get off the bus
You don't step inside the old man's head.(1)

In the next poem, "The Priest", the same surreal mode is used to communicate the poet's attitude towards the subject of the poem. Comparisons between the sun falling on the priest's cheek and a pat from the village barber, or between the bus and a purring cat, while being unusual, stop short within that range of fantasy which does not dissolve the comic and satiric intention. The ironic mode helps to define the character of the priest. His anticipation of good fortune with the arrival of the bus demonstrates that religion is the priest's livelihood:

The bus round station and stands
Stops inside the bus station and stands
purring softly in front of the priest.

A catgrin on its face
and a live, redy to eat pilgrim
held between its teeth. (2)

"Heart of Ruin" is about a ruined temple, now inhabited by the god Maruti, a bitch and her puppies, and a dung beetle. The refrain "May be he likes a temple better this way", (3) varying only in the use of the personal pronoun and applying as it does to the god himself and to the animals, expresses an ambivalent attitude. Although the temple is no longer a place of

worship, it has nevertheless become the house of god, a place that is equally well-served by his non-human creatures.

"Water Supply", where the movement of the lines recalls Eliot's well-known comparison of the fog to a cat in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", result in a totally original effect – a picture of dereliction in an Indian setting where the plumbing is weird and water taps are often dry. It will not be an exaggeration to relate the broken water tap to the drying up of traditional religion in the world of Jejuri.

This method of comparison is well demonstrated in the next poem. "The Door", where the fallen door is like a dangling martyr,"

A flayed man of muscles who can not find his way back to an anatomy book", and a "local drunk" (4).

In the conclusion the poet, in a mood of witty fancy, asserts that the door would have walked out long, long ago,

If it weren't for
That pair of shorts
Left to dry upon its shoulders. (5)

"A Low Temple" presents the kind of temple which keeps its gods in the dark. It is illuminated by lighting a match, but what is actually seen is fleeting and deceptive – and whether a hidden goddess has eight arms or eighteen does not, anyway, seem important to the priest. The sceptical visitor responds by coming back out into the light of the sun, lighting up his cigarette as through the match serves him better this way. The indifference of the priest to the true nature of the goddess seems to be matched by that of the children who play on the back of the twenty-foot stone tortoise.

In the following poem. "The Pattern" the tortoise- slab appears again, used by old men as a checkerboard, the lines of which are later smudged by the feed of children playing on it.

The character Manohar, in the poem of the same name, looks for a temple but finds a chalf inside which makes him conclude that it is just a cowshed. Manohar is trying to come to terms with the ruined enterprise that the religion of Jejuri represent.

The beggar woman in "The Old Woman" has the same sense of futility and justifies it by referring to the miserable and deadening environment:

"What else can an old woman do
On hills as wretched as these? (6)

The cracks around her eyes match cracked hills and the cracked temples. The poet humorously describes the old woman as reducing the visitor to near insignificance:

And as you look on,
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls
with a plateglass clatter
around the shatterproof crone
who stands alone.

And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand. (7)

The short poem "Chaitanya". Associates the creative energy of the god with mute stones :

he popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods. (8)

In "Hills" the demons Khandoba killed were turned into hills where "cactus thrust

up through ribs of rock" [9].

In the following " The Priest's Son", the poet asks a young boy whether he believes in the legend of Khandoba. The boy "looks uncomfortable" and is saved from his embarrassment (and from revealing his skepticism) by the quick appearance of a butterfly, a symbol of natural life among these infertile hills. The image is continued in "The Butterfly", with the apparition of the insect as transitory, disappearing as quickly as it appeared:

Just a pinch of yellow
it opens before it closes
and closes before it o
where is it" [10]

Unlike Jujuri, and in contrast to the ancient but no longer enduring spiritual significance of the shrine, the butterfly exists only in the moment:

It has no future.
It is pinned down to no past.
It's a pun on the present" [11].

Blending the images of stones and gods, the poet is now able to hypothesise about the nature of the divine in Jejuri:

What is god
and what is stone
the dividing line
if it exists
is very thin
at Jejuri
and every other stone
is god or his cousin[12].

The poem, "Ajamil and the Tigers", is a mature and intelligent rationale for the needs of sacrifice and compromise, with the poet writing a powerful and witty fable to illustrate the need for political manipulation in order to survive and be content. Ajamil, the shephered, realizes that he can have peace with the tigers only if he allows them to eat some of his sheep, that a full stomach is the best guarantee of an enduring treaty and a "Common bond" [13]. The succinct narration – almost staccato when necessary – with its effective dialogue and the conversational but ordered rhythms, contributes to the success of one of the best poems in this sequence:

The two succeeding poems, "A Song for a Vaghya" and "A Song for a Murli" are spoken by a man and a woman respectively – Vaghya in the first poem is a first-born male child given away by the parents to serve god; and Murli is a first-born female who is dedicated to the temple and often becomes a prostitute. The poems are ironically poignant: Vaghya recognizes that if he cannot beg he must steal and that if his instrument has only one string, it does not matter because he only knows a one-word song:

God is the word
and I know it backwards.
I know it as fangs
inside my flanks.
But I also know it
As a lamb
between my teeth,
as a taste of blood
upon my tongue.
And this is the only song
I've always sung[14].

The sense of his role as a sacrificial victim and the cruelty of that sacrifice is strikingly conveyed. The irony of Murli in the second poem as performing both the role of protectress and prostitute is typical:

you dare not ride off with it
don't you see khandoba's brand on its flank
you horse thief
look
that's his name
tattooed just below the left collar bone
keep your hands off khandoba's woman
you old lecher
let's see the colour of your money first[15].

The imaginative problem in this poem is one of vision – you need the light of the moon in order to see the god's mark on the hill. Murli needs the moon's light so as to identify the thief, but as a prostitute, using him, she also needs it to see the colour of his money.

The small poem, "The Reservoir" uses the imagery of drought to indicate that the great architectural feats of the ancient rulers are now without any possibilities of life. The springs of the spiritual life have also run dry.

In "A Little Pile of Stones" the poet is telling a young woman, a devotee, how to find happiness. The devotee instructed that she can learn from the stones a lesson which may lead her to happiness. "Makarand", the poem which follows, is a refection by the poet of the temptation to pary: rather than take his shirt off. He would smoke in the courtyard, preferring its freedom in the same way as he preferred to be outside in the sun with a cigarette at the conclusion of "A Low Temple".

"The Temple Rat", in which a rat seems to be as much at home in the temple as the god himself, brilliantly describes the creature's journey form the "longer middle prong" to the sanctum behind the big temple drum. Kolatkar's characteristic use of images which are related to action, as well as his use of line divisions to indicated movement, are very well illustrated in this poem; and some of the imagery is startling – the rat is like a "thick god of black blood". [16] The animal is indifferent to the wedding ceremony which is taking place and Kolatkar contrasts the lifeless gods with this living, however unpleasant, specimen from the animal world.

In "A Kind of Cross" and "The Cupboard", is found the poet's frank opinion about religion. In the first poem, the poet identifies religion with suffering, with the temple as a place of torture. The ironic parallel of a Christian cross reinforces the effect created by the "strange instrument of torture" [17]. Once it was an instrument for the slaughtering of the bull calf, but now it is a useless relic. In "The Cupboard" the dilapidated state of the shrine is further emphasized. The precariousness, insecurity, and the shabbily inorganic nature of the cupboard is suggested by the mention of linear or metallic objects –rectangles, setsquares, trapeziums, jagged silvers. The irony is directed not only against the "golden gods'[18], but also against a dominant media which has buried them under vapid editorials, recipes for eternal youth, and the usual stock-in-trade of Indian newspapers – used here to plaster and hold together the cracked and broken glass of the cupboard itself.

"Yeshwant Rao" is an interesting poem. The post prefers a "second class god" [19] to the more powerful and mainstreams ones. The strong rhetorical tone shows the poet proceeding beyond irony to a more intense and better statement even though the concluding lines are playful in tone:

I've known gods
Gods who soak you for you gold.
Gods who soak you for your soul.
Gods who make you walk
on a bed of burning coal.
Gods who put a child inside your wife.
Or a knife inside you enemy.
Gods who tell you how to live your life.
double your money
or triple your land holding.
Gods who can barely suppress a smile
as you crawl a mile for them.
Gods who will see you drown
if you won't buy them a new crown.
The only thing is,
as he himself has no heads, hands and feet,
he happens to understand you a little batter. [20]

The emphasis is on ordinary values, with Yeshwant Rao the "bone-setter" being more practical and more congenial to the worshipper's need for solutions to their immediate problems.

Kolatkar writes savagely in "The Bule Horse", where a cabaret act arranged by a priest is presented as a picture of despair and futility. The performs, such as they are, are described as

"God's own children
making music"[21]

the temple is present again. Just as the priest in "A Low Temple" had insisted on seeing an eight- (rather than eighteen-) armed goddess, so, here, he remarks on a white horse painted on the wall: "Looks blue to me"[22]

"Between Jejuri and the Railway Station" is a highly innovative experiment. The poet is now ready to leave Jejuri "this little temple town"[23], and there is a monotonous listing of the town's sixty-three houses, the three hundred pillars and so on, which interrupted by the sixty-fourth house which belongs to the temple dancer.

(The priest's son, perhaps of the earlier poem of the same name, "would rather not talk about" the dancer's skill – in the same way that he earlier evaded a question by the poet.) The pilgrimage is thoroughly reduced in significance.

You've left the town behind
with a coconut in your hand,
A priest's visiting card in your pocket
and a few questions knocking about in your head.[24]

Into this empty mood breaks a vision – of a dozen cocks and hens in a harvest dance. Again, as in a number of earlier poems, it is the animals (here the fowl) which seem to have any vitality. The typographical arrangement of "up" and "down" conveys both the joyousness of the dance as well as its topsy-turvy nature.

The concluding poem, "The Railway Station", is divided into six short sections which are rendered in a wittily surreal mode. Both the temple and railway station seem to be ensconced in a state of timelessness. The Railway station, which should be a link with the world outside this nearly fossilized place of pilgrimage, does not offer any prospect of escape into a more meaningful human world. The station has acquired some of the temple's remoteness for the concerns of everyday. The indicator, which should point to something or reveal something, points to nothing : it is described in a mock – religious way as a wooden saint who gives no clue when the next train is due. A sense of nothingness is expressed :

the clockface adds its numerals
the total is zero[25]

The station dog is described as a "pilgrim" doing penance for the last three hundred years. The young waiter at the tea stall is described as a "novice" who has taken a vow of silence. The religious imagery is persistent: the waiter exorcises you, sprinkles dishwater in your face, performs ablutions and ceremonies. The booking clerk believes in the "doctrine" of the next train and the two-headed station master belongs to a "sect" that rejects every timetable. Words such as "apocryphal", "ritual", "sect", "doctrine" each emphasise the religious connotations.

A typical humour is created by the station-master who does not bother with such pedestrian matters as timetable. The poet it also satiric about the religious exegesis which claim that everything is implicit in the original text. He means to suggest that all wisdom in the Vedas:

all timetables ever published
along with all timetables yet to be published
are simultaneously valid
at any given time and on any given track
insofar as all the timetables were inherent
in the one printed
when the track was laid.[26]

The fifth section, entitled "vows", portrays the need to make any sacrifice in order to find out the time the train is due. The criticism of the traditional Indian bureaucracy wherein the station master is the most important civil servant in Jujuri, is based on the common experience of the rule and servant relationship. Whereby the public official is not the public servant but someone who must be propitiated so the poet recommends:

slaughter a goat before the clock
smash a coconut on the railway track
smear the indicator with the blood of a cock
bathe the station master in milk
and promise you will give
a solid gold toy train to the booking clerk
if only someone would tell you
when the next train is due.(27)

The sixth and concluding vignette, called "the setting sun", is not, however, altogether ironic. There seems to be a sense that the sun

"touching upon the horizon
At a point where the rails(28)

appear to meet is symbolic of a fulfill able prophecy" but it is not altogether a hopeful ending because the image of the wheel is also suggestive of the uncertain train. The setting sun symbolizes the end of a journey.

Conclusion

It is said that religion is a poor sauce when there is no bread to eat. What people need more are the basic necessities of life-food, shelter and minimum money. At Jejuri, however, one finds mostly poor pilgrims. They come there in the hope that Khandoba and others of his denomination will relieve them of their problems and difficulties. Indian religions are rooted in the past. The impact of religion on mind is indeliable. As a result of new inventions and discoveries, scientific theories have raised doubts about the role of religion. In the present times, religion is on trial and the authority of god is challenged. Gone are those days when pilgrims thronged at religious places with full faith in god.

Notes And References

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18. Ibid,P.44

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